

The Long Journey of a 17th century Oak Chair to St. Paul's

Resting comfortably in a large pew at the front of St. Paul's, an oak chair pronounces its year of origin, **1639**, and recalls an esteemed minister who obtained the furniture in the 19th century, and his pious daughter who gifted the seat to the church in the early 20th century.

Assembled with mortise and tenon joints in England during the reign of Charles I, the two-armed chair features finely carved floral decorations on the paneled back. The ornate style indicates an original wealthy owner, but it had lost an arm and was obliging as a platform for a washer basin astride a river when it was observed by Robert Bolton in England in the early 1800s. Struck by the chair's quality, Bolton, a man of eclectic tastes, purchased it from the laundress, on the promise of providing a replacement.



A robust, sagacious man who moved easily between England and America, Bolton was born in Georgia in 1788, and traveled to Britain as a teenager to help manage his family's cotton and mercantile enterprises. When the business declined, Bolton, raised in a deeply religious family, was led to the ministry, partly through the inspiration of a prominent dissenting, or low church, clergyman William Jay. The American also married Jay's daughter Anne. Bolton developed into a popular minister and preached for several years from the pulpit of a church at Henley-on-Thames, while he and Anne's family grew to thirteen children. Seeking economic opportunities for his sons in America, the 47-year-old clergyman sailed for New York in 1835 with the entire family and belongings, including the oak chair. Among his children on the voyage was five year old, dark haired Adele.

After exploring the Mohawk Valley along the new Erie Canal for a possible home, the Boltons settled in Westchester County, purchasing a large farm in Eastchester, about four miles north of St. Paul's, where their furnishings included the 1639 oak chair. Family tradition recalls that Mrs. Bolton, upon seeing the 18th century church, exclaimed, "this is where I would like to see my darling," although the simple fieldstone and brick edifice, modeled on English churches, and the congregation of mostly British descent would have appealed to him. Bolton began his involvement with St. Paul's as Sunday school teacher when the church had recently dismissed its rector. His engaging, evangelical sermons -- in a parish founded in the 17th century on a low church tradition -- and gregarious character quickly transformed him into an admired spiritual leader. Since his religious credentials came through a dissenting church, ordination as an Episcopal clergyman was required by the Bishop of New York, before Bolton was installed as the 11th rector of St. Paul's in 1837.

Adele was seven, and along with the siblings embraced the parish for Bolton's seven year tenure. Local lore records that when they traveled the four miles to St. Paul's on Sunday mornings, the carriage could not hold the entire family, and the younger ones, probably including Adele, walked along side. Her older sister Nannette led the Sunday school and served as organist on the new Erben pipe organ. Divine service was offered twice -- morning and afternoon -- and in between the Bolton youngsters picnicked on the church grounds and swam in a nearby pond, today's Seton Falls Park in the northern Bronx.

The Boltons emerge as characters walking out of a Louisa May Alcott novel, but they were quite genuine, capable and resourceful. The boys developed impressive careers as artists, ministers, and furniture makers, repairing the one lost arm on the 1639 oak chair and assembling two more modeled on the English seat. The daughters, in the context of the 19th century, were equally enterprising and successful. Reverend Bolton was an accomplished horticulturalist and author. He also was wealthy, increased by the sale of land he had inherited in Georgia. The worldly, well educated rector was ambitious beyond the resources of the small parish at St. Paul's, and he found a realm to fulfill his talents nearby, purchasing 30 acres along the Long Island Sound shore line in Pelham, where the family developed a palatial, medieval style home, called the Priory, and established a new Episcopal church which operates today.

On the ground of the Priory, Rev. Bolton developed an all-girls residential school, which drew students from across the country; the 1639 oak chair was among the Priory furnishings. In 1850, grieving from the death through illness of one of their children, the reverend and Anne returned to England. Adele, in her 20s, and her older sister Nanette assumed control of the girls' academy, ably managing the myriad of educational and business responsibilities of the institution, which enrolled about 40 girls annually, ages 11 to 19, through the 1880s.



Adele Bolton.

Following her sister's death, and the closure of the school, Adele, who never married, moved into a small nearby cottage, taking the chair, among other family possessions, and living several more decades of a modest life, devoting her considerable energies to religious activities and charitable work. (She had helped out as a Civil War nurse at a hospital on David's Island.) She remained committed to the Episcopal church in Pelham, but also helped build a house of worship on City Island, where her brother was a minister; Adele rowed over every weekend to lead the Sunday school. Warm memories of her childhood at St. Paul's lingered. In 1910, as part of settling family business and property matters, she donated the 1639 chair to the church, in memory of her father's tenure as minister 70 years earlier: "To the Glory of God and in Living Memory of Rev. Robert Bolton Rector of this Church 1837

– 1844. Donated by his daughter Adele Bolton AD 1910," the gift inscription notes. She died the following year, at age 81.